

ALASKA MARINE HIGHWAY

— 50TH ANNIVERSARY —

Bartlett Retirement

Here she sits - the Bartlett. Hard to believe we will no longer be sailing on her. Always blue, gold, and white; I have often felt her colors should have been Cordova High's blue, silver, and white; for she truly has been the Wolverine Express for the past 34 years.

"I have swum through oceans and sailed through libraries", wrote Herman Melville in his classic, Moby Dick. For hundreds of young Cordovans, this ship was the source of their first nautical adventures, as well as a floating classroom. Many a Wolverine cut their sea legs rounding Knowles Head on the Bartlett. It was an education most will never forget. Ask an alumnus about their memories of trips across the Sound, and almost invariably the stories will spin around sea sickness.

"I remember the time we all ate breakfast right after boarding in Valdez on the way home from the Christmas tournament. Then it started getting rougher and rougher as we approached Knowles Head. Finally one girl jumped up and headed to the bathroom.. You could smell it, and the next thing you knew, everyone was racing for the garbage cans or bathrooms", said one former Wolverine.

It was so bad the Bartlett crew actually got out garden hoses to wash down the restrooms when the ship finally reached calmer waters.

Former CHS Coach Bob Lenz remembered it as his worst trip, and labeled it the Cruise From Hell. I talked with him recently, and he told me a story about the next time the Cordova teams headed to Valdez on the ferry. "While I was backing the school van onto the ferry, one of the crew members asked me if I knew the Cry of the Wolverine. I said I didn't, and he immediately started with these moaning and throwing up sounds, (imitate), much to the delight of the rest of



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the loading crew.”

Ah that slow rolling motion from those big swells coming in Hinchinbrook Entrance. “I remember the time they announced lunch over the intercom, and Ardy Hanson was the only person, I mean the only person, in the dining area.”, said one CHS grad. “Sitting there all by himself - eating fried chicken - and grinning. I’ll never forget it, or forgive him.”

Ah Salmo Point, Knowles Head, and points in between. The Bartlett was a floating classroom of lessons in geography and navigation for those who paid attention. History in the making too - a pipeline terminus being built, supertankers, and Bligh Reef. Wildlife biology - whales, otter, sea lions, porpoise, fish, birds, seals. Oceanography and geology - slowing to dodge ice bergs from receding Columbia Glacier. And the inevitable homework and makeup tests, with a cooperative crew that would let teachers, students and coaches turn the dining area into a classroom between meals. I remember giving math tests back there, and Captain John Klabo checking out the new graphics calculators, comparing how he had to learn trig with what kids knew these days.

Plus life skills education. Getting along at odd hours when tired and cranky. Respecting rules and others. Cleaning up your mess. Smiling and being polite when you didn’t feel well. Taking your turn. One for all and all for one. Pride. Representing your school and community well.

And other forms of education, as my younger daughter, who traveled for four years as Coach Virginia Anderson’s Lady Wolverine basketball manager, casually mentioned the other day. I promised I wouldn’t quote her, but let’s put it this way: I don’t know if the new ferry will have a solarium, but if it does, I guess they won’t need heat lamps to keep it warm, and I recommend the chaperones check up there on those night trips on a very regular basis.



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Oh, the tales this ship could tell. Rock and roll music during a school prom. Making a Friday run back from Valdez with only one Wolverine basketball player on board, an eventual three time All-Star and All-Stater who was sent home in the middle of a tournament for violating curfew- that lonely ride taught an unforgettable lesson. Watching a commercial van start sliding sideways down the icy ramp at low tide in Valdez in the wee morning hours, and seeing a cool driver calmly counteract the skid to glide it at a high speed into the deck while the loading crew scattered for cover.

Think of all the Cordova kids who adventured on this ship - basketball players, cheerleaders, stunt teams, pep bands, concert bands off to music festivals, wrestlers, swimmers, volleyball players, rifle teams, gymnasts, plus coaches, advisors, parents, fans, and others I am sure I have overlooked.

The history of Cordova High School as most of you know it and the Bartlett are closely intertwined. Students moved from the old high school up on the hill to the existing building in the spring of 1968; the Bartlett arrived in July of 69. The first Cordova team to travel on the Bartlett was the defending State Class B champs, coached by Chuck Taylor and featured on the front page of the Cordova Times with a very young looking Governor Wally Hickel. The 69 team included many familiar names: Tom Justice, Randy Peace, Tom and Jerry Pirtle, Pat and Mike Van Brocklin, Ron Goodrich, Bob Wiese, Fred Paulson, and Mike Poor. Merle Hanson was the assistant coach, and they capped off that season by repeating as Class B champs right here in spanking new CHS gymnasium. Many of their kids traveled on this same ship.

And while we think of our own trips away on the Bartlett, let us not forget all those landlubbers from Eielson, Monroe, West Valley, North Pole, Delta, Glennallen, Valdez, Nenana, Barrow, Tok, Northway, Houston, Palmer, Wasilla, Su-Valley, Tri-Valley, Seward, Kenai, Skyview, ACS, and other



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schools that first tested the briny on this very ship. Any true student of the game knows it is no coincidence that historically Cordova's winning percentage against visiting teams is much higher on Friday than Saturday, with many a traveling squad tumbling off the ferry and into balmy CHS Court looking greener than their uniforms.

Being from a fishing town and living on the sea, we often take things for granted. Two years ago, when the Melba, Idaho team came up for the Tipoff, we took them down to the dock to meet the ferry as it brought Valdez and West Valley over for the tournament. One of the Melba girls, watching the Bartlett approach the dock, turned in awe to a teammate, saying, "My god, it's the Titanic!"

Ah fans: I remember some of them looking a little green on trips back after post-tournament celebrations. One of them invented the term "a six pack of aspirin." For several years it seemed like we were always returning from basketball districts on the day of the Super Bowl. One year Gary Raymond, Randy Bruce, and I were huddled around a radio in the dining area, trying to hear the game over the static; the score was tied in the fourth quarter, and a crew member came in and turned it off. He had to mop the floor before we got back to Cordova. Gary is a pretty mild mannered guy, but I'll never forget how upset he was, muttering something about calling the Governor as soon as we docked.

But over the years, really a great crew. Always asking how we did, always rooting for us. Helped sponsor Wolverine basketball on KLAM. None a bigger booster than John Klabo. What a story. Started out on the Bartlett when it came to Cordova in 1969 as the lowest ranking seaman way down in the engine room; worked his way all the way up to be Captain. And what a fan. On a trip last year he was telling me the story about the time they were listening to me broadcast the



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District finals while heading to Valdez; they were so excited they docked the ship, hopped in a car, drove all the way to Glennallen, and got there quote “just in time to see Shannon Mallory make the winning basket.”

Funny thing; I was telling that story to Mike Lessley at the Valdez Elks Tournament last year.

Lessley was the colorful, excitable bald headed coach of Eielson for years during the Bob Lenz era, and he and Lenz loved to pull pranks on each other. When I finished the story, he looked at me and said: “I knew it.” I replied, “You knew what, Mike?” Lessley, always looking for conspiracy, said:

“Lenz got me again.” I said, “Mike, what are you talking about?” His reply: “Lenz knew this Klabo guy was a big fan, right? So he talked to him and made sure the ferry was always off the roughest spot - what’s it called, Knowles Head? - right when my team was eating lunch on the way to Cordova.

They’d all get sick, and Lenz would clobber us every Friday night we came to town.” I replied, “Ah come on Mike, you can’t be serious.” By now Lessley is in a frenzy. “Klabo, is he the guy with the beard. Sat at a separate table in the dining room, white table cloth, eating different food?” Trying to calm him, I replied: “Yes Mike. That’s the captains table. You can’t expect him to eat hamburgers 365 days of the year.” By now Lessley is shouting, and fans in the nearby bleachers are turning to see what is going on: “Poisoning us. They were poisoning us. Wouldn’t even eat the same food. A conspiracy. Unbelievable. I’m calling ASAA. I’m writing the Governor. I’m calling the DEA, the FBI, the CIA “. Standing and pointing his finger to the sky, Lessley shouted: “Lenz, where ever you are, curse you. And Klabo, you too!!”

So John, I want to thank you and your crew for all those Friday night hometown victories by the CHS Wolverines.

Yes, the Bartlett. What a vital link for Cordova, and a crucial part of the



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school's program. CHS students might hate the arrival and departure times or the rough seas, but in 1989 they were hoisting banners that read "Cordova High- Left High and Dry", and jumping off the dock in survival suits during a dockside protest to draw statewide attention to the impact of the loss of the ferry on school activities that year.

It's funny, I have ridden the ferry since 1972, as a coach, referee, and the Voice of the Woverines. In some ways, its a blurr, this time thing. So many memories forgotten. The thrill of victory, the agony of defeat; the good calls, the bad calls; broadcast moments like last year's closing second loss by the boys to Delta that leave you speechless counterbalanced by that winning basket by Shannon Mallory that had fans pounding their radios.

And always, a time to reflect on the ferry ride home. Sunny skies, stormy seas; icebergs and fog, sparkling water; black nights and northern lights; moon and stars, snow clad peaks; red sunrises and golden sunsets; rain and snow and winds that did blow; familiar sites and navigation lights; quiet rumbling of the trusty Bartlett; and finally, once again, Salmo Point, with the announcement over the intercom: "Cordova in 30 minutes."

The lights of Cordova pop into view, and once again we are home.

Whether to a dock full of fans waving banners and tooting horns to celebrate victory, or lines of quiet, warm cars with parents consoling us in defeat; it was this ship - and this crew - that took us off on adventure and returned us safely home.

So as the lines are cast off the Bartlett one last time, on behalf of all of us who have sailed your seas - farewell - and thank you.

Written by Dick Shellhorn

